

## **Steve the Babysitting Dictator's Friday Night by Punzie the Platypus**

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**Summary:** Post S2. Steve's Friday nights used to be for dates and girls; now he finds himself babysitting the four boys, Max, and Eleven/Jane Hopper at the Byers' house for a game night while Hopper and Joyce go out for 'just dinner' (it's a date) and Jonathan and Nancy go to the movies. Steve realizes he likes hanging out with these kids just as much as they like hanging out with him.

# Steve the Babysitting Dictator's Friday Night

*Soli Deo gloria*

**DISCLAIMER: I do NOT own Stranger Things. Or Eggos. Or The Breakfast Club. Or Parcheesi. Or Monopoly. Or KFC.**

**Steve is just . . . the best. You know?**

It all started when Jim Hopper went to Melvald's Grocery Store after work to buy a pack of cigarettes and a supply of TV dinners. But they were just an excuse. He really came to ask Joyce Byers out.

"When was the last time you ate something you didn't have to microwave?" Joyce asked in a concerned voice as she rung up the dinners.

Jim shrugged. "Do Eggos count?"

Joyce gave him a look. "Eggos don't count for any kind of nutrition," she told him.

"I agree," Jim said. "Eh, the kid likes 'em." He didn't say how it made him happy seeing El's eyes light up when he set the full plate, dripping with syrup, down in front of her.

"Well, in the meantime, you should think about eating *real* food," Joyce pointed out, teasing him.

"What, and prepared mashed potatoes and peas and carrots don't count? They're vegetables. They count," Jim argued, just for the sake of a bantering argument. He didn't really care about sad frozen vegetables. He just wanted to stretch out his turn in line. He had five people waiting behind him, but he'd bided his time waiting for four people ahead of him to get rung up, and he'd be damned if he didn't take full advantage of his earned time.

"They count as much as fried chicken counts as protein," Joyce said. She tallied it up. "\$22.16 is your total."

As Jim slowly got out his wallet to pull out some cash, he said, slow

and deliberate like, "What would it take to reassure you that I eat well?"

"I'd have to see it with my own eyes," Joyce said, smiling.

Jim glanced up. "Fine," he said, handing her a twenty and a couple of ones. "What say dinner tomorrow night? At that little diner on the corner of Hartford and Lane?"

Joyce looked startled. "Jim . . . I . . ." She didn't want to cross lines in their friendship, but sometimes, someone had to put their foot down. She leaned forward a little, ignoring the line of impatient scowling people leading up to her cash register. "I'm not in a place to be dating anyone right now," she said in a firm (though a little bit shaky) whisper.

"Who said anything about this being a date?" Jim asked gruffly. (His feathers were ruffled and he hid it behind a quick flash of anger. She could see right through him. Damn.) "It's just dinner. Catching up. I want to hear about how Will's doing these days."

Joyce looked like a deer caught in headlights, but stuttered, "Sure, of —of course. I'd love to hear about how El's doing."

"Cool. So, I'll pick you up at six tomorrow? I mean, what's the point of getting out two cars? The truck's plenty big."

"Sure. Um, sounds good. Six tomorrow." Then Joyce stopped looking a little relieved and said, "What about El?"

"What about El?" Jim said, confused.

"You don't want her all by herself tomorrow, unless someone's already going to be watching her?"

Jim felt like kicking himself. Instead of doing so in a public place, he closed his eyes and swallowed. "Yeah, um, I don't have anyone. . ." He had a lot of things he didn't want to say but thought to himself: how El was always by herself at home anyways while he was at work (she kept busy by reading little kid's books and watching Schoolhouse Rock; she really, *really* wanted to be in Mike's grade next year. Jim hadn't yet had the heart to tell her that she could barely place in

second grade, never mind high school). The one thing he liked about his bachelor days was that he could come and go when he pleased and didn't have to worry about anyone else. (He hated everything else about his bachelor days post-Sara. Everything sucked post-Sara.)

Joyce was right. He couldn't leave his kid. He *did* love El. And she always looked forward to their evenings together now. She liked planning her next hangout with Mike and his friends and trying out new vocabulary words. She *liked* their evenings. He couldn't take one away from her.

Jim looked so lost for words; Joyce couldn't imagine the relief she gave him when she said, "Will and his friends are having a game night at our house tomorrow night. El can be with them."

Jim looked relieved; then he realized: Will and his friends meant Will and Mike and Lucas and Dustin—AKA boys. "Will they have a sitter?" he asked. One of the new rules they'd added to the three original rules was 'No being alone with a boy. Period.' He wasn't looking forward to the day when they'd have to amend that rule.

"Jonathan will be home," Joyce said. "I think Nancy's coming over, too."

Nancy and Jonathan—Jim could live with that. "They're sound almost-adults. Sounds like a plan, Joyce."

"All right." Joyce suppressed an excitement coming out of the blue as she put his money in the till and handed him his receipt. "See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow." And there was a rare genuine Chief Jim Hopper smile.

He caught up his paper grocery bag and stepped away from the counter when Joyce burst, "Oh, I forgot to give you your change!" She hurriedly opened the register and gave him his eighty-four cents.

"Thanks," he said. He gave her a tilt of his chief's hat before he disappeared out into the February cold.

Joyce looked after him with a secret smile; she was only jarred from

this little moment to herself by the next person in line demanding to have their groceries rung up.

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The inevitable flaw in the plan came to light when Joyce came home from work and tried as casually as she could to mention her going out with Hopper to her boys. When she finally said it, Jonathan looked alarmed.

"Mom, Nancy and I were planning on going out tomorrow night. They're playing a new movie called The Breakfast Club that we heard was really good. It'll be the first time we've gone out in three weeks," Jonathan said.

"Oh. Is there any chance you could reschedule?" Joyce asked, a little hopeful, but not a whole lot.

"I've got shifts and homework every other night this week," Jonathan said, all his strength gone in hiding a sigh.

"Couldn't—couldn't you two stay here together, though? The kids would just be here in the living room playing games," Joyce suggested.

"And do what, Mom? What would we do while we're babysitting my brothers and his friends?" Jonathan didn't say this as cruelty. He said it as dull fact.

Joyce looked at him, even as he wouldn't look at her. Jonathan was asked to do too many things that no teenager should have to do. She was the kind of mom who wanted to let him be a teenager; he was too young to be an adult. He didn't deserve to be forced to grow up too fast to help make ends meet and watch his little brother just because his father wasn't there beside her.

"That's fine, Jonathan. Go out with Nancy. That's fine."

"Mom—" Jonathan said. She sounded a little bitter—

"No, no, it's fine. You had this scheduled already. I just didn't realize it." Joyce waved a hand as she went to do the dishes. She sighed as she faced the sink. She knew she was being bitter. "It's—it's fine."

Now she just sounded defeated. She waved a hand after him. "Go, enjoy your date with Nancy. She's a lovely girl."

"But, Mom, I-I can't. I can't do that to you. You work too hard. You deserve a night to go eat dinner with a gu—" Jonathan meant to say, almost without thinking, 'a guy you like', but caught himself before this conversation was turned on a *way* different head. "With Hopper."

"It's okay, Jonathan. I'll just call him tomorrow and tell him we'll go another night." Joyce turned away from her bottomless sink of dishes and put a hand on her eldest's shoulder. It was amazing how much taller he was than her. He was grown up in so many ways. "It's *okay*," she said with shining eyes, squeezing his shoulder. "There are plenty of other nights."

"You sure?" Jonathan asked.

Joyce nodded. She was done with her sons not being able to be normal. "I'm sure."

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Will overhead all this (being so quiet, they'd forgotten about him listening in as their conversation was just between the two of them) and related the entire thing to the guys when their first class let out the next day.

"I don't want my mom to not have a life because of me," Will said as they walked to their lockers.

"If it's any comfort, it's all of *us*, too," Lucas said.

"So basically we need to find another babysitter in the next five hours or your lovesick mom's going to be watching us all evening," Max said matter-of-factly.

Will looked at her with an aghast, surprised face. "Mom's not *lovesick*, Max. He's just Hopper—"

"Oh sure, he's 'just Hopper' to her, too?" Mike said.

Will looked at Mike in surprise. "What are you saying?"

"What I'm saying is that your mom and the Chief like hanging out with each other. Like you do when you like someone," Mike pointed out.

"Oh, so like, you and El?" Max pointed out.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Mike said, brushing her off.

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever," Dustin mocked him, grinning.

Mike elbowed Dustin. "Shut up," he said.

"*kay, that's* not going to happen," Dustin said. "Anyway, I have a simple solution to the babysitting problem that will let your mom go on her date, Will."

"It's not a *date*," Will insisted.

"Sureeeeeee," Dustin said. "I'll just ask Steve to hang out with us." He was surprised to see the unconvinced faces of his friends exchange secret looks together. "What, guys?" Dustin said. "Steve's a really cool guy. He's also like the best sitter *ever*. You couldn't ask for anyone better."

"Sure, but . . ." Mike said.

"But what?" Dustin wanted to know.

"Steve's a basketball player, plus one of the most popular guys in his school," Lucas said. "Won't he have like, a million better things to do on a Friday night than babysit a bunch of kids while they play board games? He's gotta, like, have plans or something. He can't just drop everything if you ask him to, Dustin. We're a bunch of nerds. He's cool. Why would he do that?"

"Cause he *likes* us, that's why. You don't think he had more fun stuff to do than help me find Dart or save everyone from the Demodogs? Remember that?" Dustin said. Everyone looked a little worried and uncomfortable and ashamed. "Just because we're no longer in this big team against the Upside Down doesn't mean we aren't *still* a big team. Steve's a part of the party now. Not this party—" he swiveled a finger in a circle that included all five of them, "but in the big, Hawkins-

versus-the-Upside-Down party. You don't turn your back on a party member. He's one of us now. He'll say 'yes'. Trust me."

"Okay," Will said, waving a hand. "Go ahead and ask him. Let me know soon so I can tell my mom."

"Okay, sweet," Dustin said, grinning his now tooth-filled grin.

At recess, while Max showed off a couple of skateboard tricks to Will, Mike, and Lucas out on the asphalt (Lucas appreciating it far more than Mike ever would), Dustin stuck a quarter into the payphone and called Steve's house before cursing under his breath and hanging up. "He won't be at his house. He's in school," he yelled at his friends from across the asphalt.

"Can't you just ask him on the way home?" Mike yelled back.

"I don't know when his school lets out, never mind if he gets out and has practice or whatever," Dustin said, sounding annoyed. He felt responsible for the Steve part of this game night plan, and felt anxious for it to work. Right now, it wasn't working.

"Nancy gets out at 2:50. He has to be out by that time, 'cause they usually hung out together afterwards," Mike called back. When Lucas and Will gave him odd looks as to say, 'How do you know so much about your sister's old habits with her ex-boyfriend?', Mike explained. "Mom always asked her why she got home so late. That's the explanation she always gave her at the dinner table. Duh."

"And you don't think she was lying at all to cover her tracks? Ever?" Lucas threw at him.

Mike rolled his eyes. "Whatever." He yelled back at Dustin, "Try finding him after school."

"I can't guarantee that I'll be able to find him before five!" Dustin shouted back, like he had to explain something simple to this group of idiots he hung out with.

Mike threw up his hands. "Then run over to the high school and ask him now!"

"I can't do that! It's recess at this school now. He could be stuck in some science lab classroom for all I know!" Dustin shouted back.

There now became apparent to the five oddities that there was a group of disapproving, scowling kids along the sidelines listening to them scream at each other. Dustin walked over to his friends and said, "We need to get him a walkie."

"What?" Lucas and Mike said incredulously.

"We need to give him a walkie. If he's a part of our party, we have to be able to communicate with him at all times," Dustin said factually.

"Okay, first off, Steve isn't 'part of our party'. If we make Steve 'part of our party', that means we'll have to get walkies for Nancy and Jonathan. Do you *really* want to have walkies for Nancy and Jonathan?" Lucas appealed to Mike and Will; Mike vehemently shook his head while Will, after a moment, finally quietly shook his head no.

"Right. We've got that established. Also, Steve can't be part of our party because *Steve doesn't hang out with us unless it's a life-or-death situation!*" Lucas pointed out. "He's a high school senior and we're just making it into high school. He's not a part of our peer group."

Dustin pointed at Mike. "El's part of our party even though she can't hang out with us in public all the time."

"El's different," Mike insisted. "She was with us for all of the Upside Down stuff. We all went through it together. She *is* a part of our party."

"With that logic, Nancy and Jonathan and your mom"—here, Lucas nodded to Will—"and the Chief are now all equal members of this party. That is true, following that logic. But it is also not true: they are not members of *our* party. They just *aren't*. They just aren't the same way that Steve just *isn't* a member of *our* party!"

"So this is it, huh?" Dustin said, looking at all his friends with a certain defiant anger. "Mike can bring a member into the party," waving a hand at Mike in reference to the addition of El, "and Lucas

can bring a member into the party," here waving a hand to Max, who looked a little affronted—as she should—"but I can't? Is it 'cause Steve isn't a girl? Is that a new rule? No more dudes, all new members have to have previously instated party members crushing on them?"

Lucas looked fit to pounce on Dustin and make him both take back his words and eat his fist, when Max said, "Why can't he?"

All the boys stared at her. She'd been so quiet, which was unusual for Max. She didn't tell them that this was because she felt that this was a discussion for the main core group of party members. She was, after all, a grafted branch into their firmly rooted tree. Sometimes she spoke up about certain issues, but this seemed like one in which she had no say. Until she couldn't shut up any longer. She was, after all, a party member too. And sometimes she found Dustin really annoying, but she didn't like seeing Mike and Lucas gang up on him.

Lucas turned to her. He didn't want to lay down the law on her quite as he had done on Dustin; mainly because he and Dustin liked to argue, and because Max was his girlfriend. So his words were chosen with more care as he said, "Steve is too old to be in our party. It's just . . ." He sought for another explanation, but he couldn't.

"It's just . . . nothing. It's just that you don't want him to because it destroys the sanctity of the party," Max said. "Makes it too exposed, too open to anyone. It makes it not special anymore and you guys like your special group."

The four boys looked at each other. Well, it *was* true. They all came together as best friends because they were the AV club—the nerds, the geeks, the picked-upon. They naturally came together like magnets. They were all very similar and like likes like.

"Maybe I don't get as much say in this as Mike or Will does. But for what it's worth, if Dustin wants Steve as a party member, I say 'yes'. He's earned it, if any of us have. He's defeated Demodogs, for Pete's sake." Max shrugged and exited the group on her skateboard, shredding along the entrance to the janitor's closet.

The four boys stared after her. Will finally said, "She has a point, you

know."

Lucas glanced at his watch. "You have nine minutes."

Nobody said anything. Nobody knew who he was talking to until Lucas fixed his gaze on Dustin and said, pointing past the school, "It's two minutes to the high school entrance on your bike and two minutes back, leaving you only five minutes to find Steve!"

"Wait, you mean he can be a party member?" Dustin asked, amazed.

"Whatever—recess ends in nine minutes! Dustin, for Pete's sake, go!"

Dustin didn't need to be told twice. He bolted for his bike, fiddled with the chain, cursing as his fingers turned to all thumbs at the lock, and raced down the road not even seated, his growing legs pumping as fast as they could against the pedals.

Mike, Will, and Lucas watched after him. "Do you think he can do it?" Mike wondered.

"Let's hope so," Lucas said, turning to Mike. "If the Chief's going out with Mrs. Byers, he might bring El with him."

Mike instantly looked like a light was glowing inside him. "You really think so?" he said, his voice all squeaky and trying not to sound excited and failing.

Lucas shrugged, teasing him, and Will looked happy for Mike. Mike watched Dustin disappear around the curve in the road and whispered to himself, "Hurry, Dustin. Hurry."

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Heaving, Dustin threw his bike to the ground the moment he passed over the high school parking lot. His head swiveled around as he panted; where *was* he? There didn't seem to be anyone outside the school practicing sports or anything; maybe he was in that big scary old high school, hidden in some classroom with older hot girls and droning grey-haired teachers. "Come on, Steve; where are you, man?!"

But no! There he was, leaning against a corner of the brick building,

almost hidden by the shadows. Pacing, brooding, skipping class, whatever. He was there! Dustin ran over to him, shouting, "Steve! Steve! Steve!"

Steve, hands in his pockets, thought he was going crazy. Was that someone calling his name? He just thought he could play hooky on Bridge's class and grovel in self-pity in peace. (It was hard to stand English 102. It was hard to stand it when you could hear Tommy H. and Carol whisper behind you and feel Billy give you death glares from the side and see Jonathan and Nancy exchanging half-hidden secret smiles right in front of you. Yeah, Ms. Bridge's class was a treat.) He looked up and saw Dustin about to hit him like a train gone off the rails and all he could say incredulously was, "Henderson?"

"Steve, Steve, whooo, Steve," Dustin said, panting, hands on his knees, once he'd come to a complete and utter stop. "Hi."

"Hey, hey, what's up, man? What happened?" Steve said, instantly on the alert. "Did—did the Gate open again? Do I need my bat? Are there Demodogs after you?"

"What? N-no," Dustin shook his head. "We're all like, completely fine and stuff."

"Oh. Okay. Then what's with your try-out for cross-country?" Steve asked, pocketing his hands.

"I need you to do this favor for me. I know I like, owe you a lot of favors by now, but you gotta help us out of this bind."

"Wait, it went from 'favor for me' to 'help us'. What is it?" Steve's hands left his pockets and landed on his hips. He still had to look down at Dustin, but next year he might be looking up.

"Okay, so, long story short, Hopper wants to go on a date with Joyce Byers but she can't because she has to stay at her house with me and the guys and Max while we have a game night, and she has to because Jonathan can't because he's going out with Nancy, so we need you take Mrs. Byers's place so she can go out tonight," Dustin let out all in one breath.

Steve blinked. "I-I didn't get more than five words of that." Really, all that kept ringing in his ears were the names *Nancy* and *Byers*.

"Long story short," Dustin said, finally catching his breath and speaking at two-thirds speed, "can you babysit us at tonight at the *Byers*' house?"

"Babysit? Tonight?" Steve said, even as the word *Byers* was the one echoing in his brain.

"Please?" Dustin said. "I know it's short notice and stuff, but—"

"Sure," Steve said suddenly.

Dustin looked taken aback. "Wait, really?"

Steve couldn't meet his eyes for a moment. He didn't want to go home, not to his parents who had the awful habit of screaming at each other. He had no basketball practice tonight; he was too . . . post-break-up with *Nancy* to go on any dates right now. It was good, that she found someone who could be what she needed, but . . . it still hurt. Steve never carried on, never let on, never let anyone know that, but it still hurt. Not an angry hurt. But an aching hurt. His heart ached every time he saw *Jonathan* and *Nancy* walk down the halls of school together, every time he caught a glimpse of them together in a side-hall, her gushing over one of his latest photos, while he just looked at her.

Steve figured a Friday night hanging out with all these little munchkins might not be a half-bad idea. "Yeah, really," he said, meeting Dustin's eyes. He had a purpose when he was with these kids; they *needed* him. And Steve . . . damn it, he needed to be needed. He liked it, and wanted it, and felt lost without having someone who needed him. It was kind of nice, he had to admit, to have all these kids who needed him.

Dustin glowed like Christmas had come early. "Okay. Cool. I'll—I'll go tell the guys and Ms. *Byers*. Um, the *Byers*' house at like, six, tonight?"

Steve point a finger at him, his arm stretching out. "Tonight."

"Okay." Dustin walked backwards, 'cause he couldn't stop staring at Steve in amazement. He was finally drawn out of his amazement by a salute from Steve. He returned it and saw his watch in bringing his arm so near his face. He cursed and yelled, "See you there!" as he took a running start onto his bike.

Steve watched him disappear and felt something in his chest. It wasn't that awful hurting ache that Nancy gave him. It was something warm and happy and it . . . it didn't hurt.

Damn, he *had* missed those stupid little squirts.

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Mike, Will, Lucas, and Max waited on the schoolgrounds anxiously for Dustin. The last peals of the bell rang in their ears as they slowly became the last kids left on the playground.

"How much longer?" Mike asked Lucas anxiously.

Lucas's eyes were trained on his watch. "He's got t-minus seventeen seconds before we have a teacher on us." Lucas looked up to the road with a sigh. Deep inside, *of course* he wanted Dustin to be back in time. He gave him a hard enough time about it, but *of course* he wanted him to do it. He believed he could, in the end.

"Wait, there he is," Will breathed out, amazed. His finger pointed to a quickly-approaching dot.

"There he is!" Mike said, relieved.

Max looked relieved. Lucas's eyes flickered back and forth between the seconds counting down on his watch and one of his best friends approaching.

Dustin, in his haste, hadn't touched the bike seat in a hot minute. He pumped fast and crashed to a halt in front of his friends. Lucas cocked his head, clicking his tongue. "Seven seconds late, Henderson."

"Stuff it, Sinclair," Dustin said, panting. He tugged his bike back up and they all crowded around him as he guided his bike back to the rack.

"Well? Was the mission successful?" Mike asked worriedly.

"Yeah, is Steve babysitting us tonight or not?" Lucas wanted to know.

(It was a good thing all the other kids had disappeared back into their classrooms. Imagine what social pariahs this funny little group would be if it was found out they still needed a babysitter when their parents went out.)

"Ohhhh, Steve is *sooo* babysitting us tonight!" Dustin said gleefully. He pointed a finger at Lucas. "Suck on that!"

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Whatever, man. Will," turning to him, "call your mom. Let her know that she's covered for tonight!"

"Okay." Will stood still, rolling a quarter over in his hand.

Everyone stared at him. "What are you waiting for? We needed to be in our seats, like, five minutes ago!" Lucas said.

Will finally spoke. "My mom's going on a date with Chief Hopper."

Slightly weirded-out faces were exchanged between all party members. "Yeah, that's just weird," Dustin said.

"Are you sure it's a *date-date*?" Lucas wondered.

"I hope not," Will said, torn. He knew his mom . . . well, she and Hopper spent a lot of time together because of the Upside Down . . . she *did* like him . . . but she still felt the loss of Bob like a hole in her chest. It was too soon, again . . .

Will gulped and turned to the telephone. He just inserted the quarter and picked up the receiver when Mr. Clarke appeared on the back steps. Hands on his hips, a quick overview of the back lot showed him the five students absent from his class. Will just caught his mom's voice as Mr. Clarke took quick steps over to them. Lucas, Mike, and Dustin cursed and whispered frantically over each other as Max watched them, cool and calm, and Joyce said, "Hello? Who is this?"

"Mom? It's Will—"

"Will! Will, are you okay? Are you at school? What happened—?!"

"No, everything's okay. You can go out tonight. Don't worry about a babysitter. He's coming over at six."

"Wait, babysitter? Tonight? He? W-wait, who?"

"Steve Harrington." Mr. Clark was within earshot now. "Gotta go. Love you. See you after school." Will slammed the receiver now just as Joyce opened her mouth to respond. All five kids stared back at Mr. Clarke, looking like they were playing innocent after doing something they shouldn't have. Which, they were.

Mr. Clarke smiled, not unkindly. "The bell rang five minutes ago."

"Yeah, sorry. We lost track of time," Lucas said; Lucas, the keeper of time and ever-watchful watcher of his watch.

"We were just heading in," Dustin said smoothly.

"Yeah, we were," Mike corroborated.

Mr. Clarke turned his eyes on Will. "Who were you calling, Will?"

Will spoke the truth. "My mother."

Mr. Clarke knew as well as any of the faculty that Will Byers had always been a delicate child, and suffered more especially after his week-long disappearance last year. He said, "Are you feeling all right, Will? Do you want to make a stop at the nurse's office?"

Will shook his head. "No, I'm all right now." Something in his big bright brown eyes convinced Mr. Clarke that he was telling the truth. "I'm good."

Mr. Clarke looked each poker face in turn and decided that this was the truth he must accept. "All right," he said in a light tone, "let's get into class now. You'll never learn anything if you aren't in class."

The five kids knew otherwise, but submitted meekly back to their classroom as they all secretly reveled in Dustin's victory and in the fun evening planned ahead in the hours to come.

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"We can't play D&D," Dustin said immediately, looking ready to fight anyone who argued otherwise.

"Why can't we?" Mike said wonderingly. He looked at El by his side and, failing to hide the smile on his face, said, "I want to teach El how to play."

"Yeah. I want to see what all the fuss is about," Max said, too.

Dustin and Will exchanged alarmed looks. Lucas looked surely torn in two as Dustin grabbed his and Mike's arms and said, "We're just gonna quickly huddle about this." He met eyes with Max and El, both confused, and said with a quick smile showing off his new front teeth, "Just us guys. Won't be but just a second."

These four stepped off to the side of the Byers' kitchen and huddled like a bunch of football players debating a play choice rather than what kind of board game they were going to play once Steve arrived.

"I have a simple question that can hopefully be fully understood by your *clearly* addled brains," Dustin said, here especially to Mike and Lucas. "Are YOU INSANE?! Bring the girls into D&D? Are you *literally* insane?!"

"No, we're not," Mike said. "What the hell, Dustin? What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with *me*? What's wrong with *me*?! No, no, you're not turning the tables on me. I'm not the one with questionable sanity here!" Dustin said pointedly.

"Dustin, chill, man," Lucas cautioned.

"Oh, that's *rich* coming from you! If Max wasn't here, you'd *totally* be on my side!" Dustin said. "D&D is *sacred*. It's rich and intense and ten hours long and this huge campaign and needs to be appreciated. You can't just pop it out for any random game night! And, *guys*," here Dustin met eyes with his friends and said pleadingly, "it's *ours*! It's *ours*! Will," here he appealed to Will, the only really single friend in the group, "come on, man, back me up here!"

Will shrugged uneasily. He didn't want to cause a great schism to break out between the four best friends, but he *was* totally getting Dustin's arguments. "We *do* have other games. There's Parcheesi, Monopoly, Battleship. . ."

"Okay, fine, but *no* Battleship," Lucas demanded firmly. "That's only a two-player game. If we're all going to be playing games together, it's all the same game."

"Well, that leaves out Parcheesi as well, since it's four-player," Mike reminded them. His eyes strayed to El and he said, not breaking his gaze, "Unless we team up."

"Yeah, no teams," Dustin affirmed firmly. Like he wanted to spend the whole night watching the two guys teamed-up with their girlfriends while making heart-eyes at them. He loved his friends, but they made him gag.

"Monopoly it is," Will said, racing off to find the battered old game set in the mess of games in his room.

That led to a dispersal of friends to different spots of the Byers' house. Mike sat with El and explained to her the concept of Monopoly. She had a good head, but she'd never been introduced to the rough side of the business world and the cutthroat methods of buying Park Place and Boardwalk before anyone else. Lucas sat with Max on the floor with their backs against the sofa. "Did you males finally come to a decision that all could agree with?" she wondered. She played with the wheels of her skateboard she held across her lap.

"After much debate, we finally settled on Monopoly," Lucas said. Turning to her with a grin growing on his face, he said, "I totally get to be the moneybags, by the way."

"Good, 'cause I'm getting the car," she said. "I need my wheels. Oh, and I'm totally gonna kick your ass at it, by the way."

"You've never seen *me* play Monopoly," Lucas warned her.

Max raised her eyebrows. "And you've never seen *me* play. So, first warning: *watch out*."

Lucas grinned, and she couldn't help but smile.

Will, meanwhile, returned to the kitchen table with the board game in his hands. His mom stood nearby making small awkward talk with Hopper. Will knew how much time she'd spent getting ready in anticipation for this 'date'. (She wouldn't call it a 'date', but Will wasn't ten anymore. He was Will the Wise, after all.) She acted like a high school girl, blushing and not meeting the Chief's eyes and playing at her coat buttons with her hands, like she needed something to do for her bundle of nerves. Will was secretly very happy for her, in the end. It had been a while since he'd seen his mom smile like that.

Hopper, meanwhile, was much better at hiding his nerves than she was. Inside, he was a mess. He hadn't been on a date in a couple of years; most of those turned out to be empty flings; none of them had made him such a nervous wreck. Before he drove over here with El, he went through something like six cigarettes before he fired the car up. She looked at him for a while as they drove down the road; he wished she'd let herself become consumed with heart-thumping thoughts about seeing Mike, instead of staring him down like an undecipherable puzzle she was trying to understand.

"It's just dinner," he finally said, mumbling. He flung out the rest of the cigarette and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

Now he stood next to Joyce Byers like it was twenty years ago and they were in the school auditorium at senior prom, waiting for the other to ask them to dance. He hated it. He was surprised that the old feeling was there, too.

"You look nice," he told Joyce.

She'd bought a new dress. She tucked some hair behind her ear and said, "Well, thanks. You do, too."

Hopper wished he could light up another cigarette after they had another awkward silence and he finally said, "Who's the babysitter you got for the kids, again?"

"Steve Harrington," Joyce said.

Hopper gave her a look. Joyce went on, babbling, "Dustin asked him and he said 'yes' and I thought, 'Well, why not?' He's a part of this whole thing now. Besides, Jonathan's going out with Nancy tonight and—"

"All right, I get it," Hopper said. He didn't need to have Steve Harrington justified to be their babysitter. But Joyce got the vibe that she'd been rambling too long, so she shut up.

Hopper sighed and tapped his foot against the floor. He turned to Dustin, who was helping Will get the game pieces out, and said, "Hey, when is Harrington showing up? You told him six, right?"

"Of course I told him six," Dustin said. He glanced at his watch. He gulped. 6:10. He looked up to the impatient police chief. "He should be here any minute."

At that minute, Jonathan came sneaking out of his bedroom as quickly as he could; ever since he and Nancy started dating, he'd been practicing with hair gel for the first time in his life; whether or not he was proud of his results was a different subject of conversation. His jacket flapped as he pressed a kiss to his mother's cheek and grabbed his keys from the hook on the wall. "What time are you planning to be back?" Joyce called after him.

Jonathan stuck the keys in his pocket at the front door. "Eleven-ish?"

"Okay, just—just not after midnight. I know there's no school tomorrow, but—but still," Joyce called after him, now sounding more like his mother than a nervous high school girl in front of her crush.

"Got it." Jonathan waved a hand to the scattered kids and his mom and her '... date?' "See you guys."

A chorus of "Bye's" echoed behind him as he opened the door to see Steve Harrington fumbling for the doorknob; his arms were laden with KFC buckets and bags; hence, the fumbling.

"Oh, thanks for getting the door, man." Jonathan was flustered and Steve was all smoothness as Jonathan stepped aside and Steve entered his house, calling, "Hey guys, Dad's home!"

Joyce and Hopper let out a collective breath together (their babysitter didn't bail, which meant they could leave with peace of mind and actually just be alone together) and the kids jumped to their feet. Joyce looked a little alarmed as Jonathan left, still shaking his head in surprise, as Steve waltzed into the kitchen; er, he *would've* swaggered into there if it wasn't for the six kids crowding around them. He was sure that if they were five years younger, they'd all be hanging onto his legs like toddlers. "Okay, okay, back off, you little monkeys," he demanded. He set the KFC on the table and wiped his hands against his skinny jeans and offered a hand out to Joyce. "Sorry about being late. The line at the restaurant was *crazy*. Hope the chicken didn't get cold."

"Oh, I just had cold sandwiches and snack cakes for dinner." Joyce stepped forward and lowered her voice. "I hope you don't think I wanted you to go to all that trouble. Here, um," she dove into her purse hanging from her side and ruffled through her wallet, her hands shaking, "I'll be happy to reimburse you—"

"Mrs. Byers," Steve said in a calm, loud voice.

"I don't want you think that we were expecting it of you or won't pay you back—"

"Joyce!"

Joyce looked up, startled, at this very grown-up young man. He said in a calm voice, looking nonchalant and discreet, "Don't worry about it." He inhaled a little. Would he go on to explain that he felt *he* owed *her*? "To be honest," here with a little sigh, "coming over here will be the highlight of my week. I just wanted to make it a little more special. So, don't worry about it. 'Kay?"

Joyce hid a little smile as she hid her wallet back in her purse. "Okay."

"All right," Steve said louder, now back to the general audience, "let's see this two kids off on their date, and then we can dig in!"

Joyce and Hopper tripped over themselves to clear things up in front of their kids (as Will and El exchanged a knowing, mutual look); "It's

not a date!" Hopper said in a commanding voice, lest anyone challenge him.

"It's just dinner," Joyce said as nonchalantly as she could; it was a job she messed up massively. No one believed her.

"It's *just* dinner," Hopper said, meeting all seven pairs of eyes. The look on his face said, "Don't fight me on this. It's a fight you won't win."

"All right, if you say so," Steve said.

The kids practically shoved the two adults out of the house so they could eat junk food and play games. Hopper stopped after putting on his coat and put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "You realize you have to protect these kids, keep them alive until we come back," he said in a low voice.

"Yeah. I know. I've done it before and I'll do it again," Steve said, a little annoyed that his authority felt undermined and a little serious.

"You still have that bat?" Hopper asked seriously.

Steve cocked his head toward the door. "In the trunk of my car."

"Once we leave," Hopper said, "bring it inside. Keep it so you can grab it at a moment's notice."

"Got it," Steve said. He wasn't scared at the idea that he might need to use it again; he was ready if that moment ever came again.

Hopper clapped his hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Joyce waiting in fidgety anticipation by his pickup's passenger door. He inhaled and Steve said, "Go get her, man."

Hopper didn't say anything as he hid a smile, shoved Steve's shoulder, and let the door close behind him, leaving all thoughts of the kids in the Byers' house as he walked up to meet Joyce for their date.

Steve, meanwhile, turned back inside to see the six kids wildly tearing open the buckets and paper bags from KFC. He put his hands on his hips and called, "Hey, guys." When no one save El paid him

any attention, he shouted, "Hey, GUYS!"

All six kids turned to him, Dustin's hand in a bucket of chicken.

"So, I'm the babysitter this evening. So let's lay down some ground rules: everyone has to eat everything on their plate and then we have to clean up after dinner *before* we play any games." At the responsive groans, Steve said, "Hey, do you think they'll ever let me babysit again if they come home to this place looking like a pig sty? Yeah, no thanks. If you guys can't play nicely together, then games are out. No mutinies, no breaking anything, and everyone does as *I* say. Clear?" The last time he babysat them, they *totally* didn't respect his rules, and sure, they helped save Hawkins, but hey, they could've died! He couldn't let that happen again, especially after Hopper's little talk with him.

"I don't remember him being such a dictator," Lucas muttered under his breath.

"That's because last time, we wouldn't let him," Max reminded him.

The six kids shrugged and nodded and Steve looked like he was expecting a much bigger fight and was surprised that there was none. He nodded and said, "Go ahead and divvy it all up. I'll be right back."

The bat was retrieved and leaned against the sofa's armrest; Steve walked into the kitchen to find *five* going at the special occasion junk food; El, however, had discovered the package of snack cakes Joyce had left out. Steve pointed a finger at her, saying in a low voice, "Hey."

She looked up, package in hand, eyes asking questions while also remaining resolute.

All Steve said was, "No dessert before dinner."

El's face read as annoyed, but she didn't fight him on it; she just threw the package down and sat next to Mike.

There were various disagreements about the divvying up of the four different kinds of pieces of fried chicken (somehow Will won out against Dustin for the last chicken thigh), but otherwise supper went

all right. There were mumbles and mutterings as the table was cleared and the counter wiped down, but otherwise the rules of Steve the Babysitting Dictator were, for the most part, followed. Then they officially broke out Monopoly.

They went easy the first time around the board, for El's sake. She stayed by Mike, drawn to his side like he was home in a scary world, and listened intently as he explained the rules of the game. His cowboy and her iron hung out on the spaces a *lot* together. Max with her car and Lucas with his moneybags were doing *extremely* well on their own. Dustin made his dog make a lot of noises ("That isn't *any* better than the meowing," Lucas told him truthfully, like the best friend he was) and Will's wheelbarrow ended up in jail a lot, when he wasn't buying up all the spaces. Steve, meanwhile, was doing pitifully with his thimble; he sat back in his chair and said things like, "Nobody can do well with a *thimble*. Now I had the moneybags, I'd be *in* this thing."

The whole game was doing pretty well, for a while; if it had been a D&D campaign, the boys would've gotten into deep-seated arguments and yelling matches at each other half an hour ago. As a whole, it was smooth sailing for Steve the Babysitting Dictator. That is, until Max and Mike went at it.

Even after El came back, Mike and Max weren't exactly the best of friends. They could get along well enough when with Lucas, Dustin, and Will, but the littlest thing could set them off and they'd have fighting friction between them. An example of this was when Mike paid out to her for landing on St. James Place. "You only gave me fourteen," she said, rifling through the yellow and white bills.

"Yeah," he said, "I only landed on St. James Place. If I'd landed on *New York Place*, then I'd owe you sixteen."

Max looked up to the dice and said, "That's nine total, not seven. You needed to go to New York."

"That's El's roll," Mike said, nodding to El next to him. "She just rolled that."

Max looked annoyed. "No, she didn't!"

"She just did!"

And they went at it like that over *everything*. They argued over whether or not when you were in jail and rolled doubles, you left on that turn or on the third roll or on the next roll *after* the third roll. Max wanted all the luxury tax money to be put in the bank while Mike argued that when *his* family played Monopoly, they put the money in the center of the board and whoever landed on Free Parking got to keep the money. Their arguments were interspersed by calm, loud interruptions by their friends.

"I'm just going to go ahead and put three houses on Park Place and Boardwalk," Lucas said calmly, trying to brag but no one giving him enough audience to rub it in.

"Yes!" Dustin said when Steve landed on Reading Railroad. "I own all four railroads, so that's \$100."

"So now I own three colors," Will said, pleased after making a really good business deal with a suffering, almost-bankrupt Steve.

And El smiled, looking up for approval from Mike when she got the second Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card after she landed on Community Chest. Her smile faded, though, when she found him in yet another petty argument across the board with Max; both of them were standing up and yelling. "You collected payment on North Carolina even though it's mortgaged!" he accused her.

"Oh, so I'm the one stealing money? So you always having money despite landing on so many hotels has *nothing* to do with the fact that you're the banker?!" Max threw at him.

"Are you saying I'm taking funds from the bank?!" Mike demanded to know.

"I'm just saying that you should've been bankrupt by now!"

Before this could come to someone launching themselves across the Byers' kitchen table, Steve stood up and demanded control of the situation. "That's it! I'm tired of this crap! I've been warning you two to settle down or else face the consequences—and I'm done! The

game's done!" (This had only a little bit to do with the fact that while he *was* enjoying himself, he was going to place last 'cause he sucked at Monopoly.) "We're all just going to sit and watch a movie!" The six kids looked up at him, startled that he actually was putting his foot down. Steve waved a hand over the game and said, "Pick it up." He clapped his hands. "Come on. I mean it!"

Dustin and El (who had been enjoying herself, playing this fun game with her friends—and Mike) gave Mike and Max, respectively, resentful looks as they helped Will and Lucas pack up the game. Mike and Max gave each other glares and took opposite spots from each other on the couch. Lucas next to Max and Jane next to Mike proved a good buffer between them while they still stewed in their anger. Will and Dustin sat next to Steve (Dustin very happy indeed); Steve let his long arm dangle down the side of the couch past Mike and El's ears until he touched the baseball bat; he carefully carried it along the couch until it was right behind him. Now knowing that he had a weapon easy to reach the moment he heard a noise, Steve took a deep breath and turned his attention to the movie Will had put on.

That was how the night went. The boys and Max made a bunch of witty or funny comments about the movie, kinda ruining the movie-watching experience even as they watched it—but that was okay. They spilled crumbs and got plastic wrappings everywhere as they bit into their cakes and sucked the sugar from their fingers. And, because it was Friday night after a long day, despite how grown-up they thought themselves, the kids slowly, one by one, dropped off to sleep.

The movie ended at ten and Steve straightened, like he was pulling himself out of a daze, and looked at all the kids on either side of him. The movie playing after the one they just watched opened with a horror scene; and the only kid he found awake was staring at the TV: El.

"Well, they're all out," Steve said to himself until his eyes landed on El. Her eyes were fixated on the TV, even as Mike's long, loving arm was wrapped protectively over her shoulders. "Except you." Steve glanced at the TV to see a bloodsucking monster attacking some blonde lady emitting a blood-curdling scream and said, "Do you want to watch it?" It wasn't a question of *could she handle it?* Steve didn't know too much about Eleven Hopper, but he knew she'd seen some of

the scariest things out of all of them and was still standing at the end of the day. No, he just wondering if she wanted it left on or not.

El shrugged and looked up to gaze at Mike's face. Her eyes were transfixed by his head of unruly curls.

Steve knew that look on her face. He said quietly, for the sake of conversation, "So, is he a friend, or your boyfriend, or, you know, something?"

Jane looked at Steve. She shrugged. "He's Mike," she said simply.

And somehow, Steve understood exactly what she meant. "Got it," he said, leaning back against the cushions with a tired sigh as she leaned her head against Mike's boney yet sturdy shoulder. "I get it." He felt a little sorry for himself. Here Nancy was out on a date with Jonathan, leading him to be babysitting Jonathan's and Nancy's kid siblings with their friends; even Chief Hopper was out getting it on with Joyce Byers; even the middle-schoolers were getting together; wasn't Max's sleeping head leaning against Lucas with his arm around her; and then of course, El and Mike Wheeler?

This was his Friday night. And yet, he knew he shouldn't feel bad for himself. It was a great night. He had a great time. He got to hang out with these six kids who were all unafraid of being themselves; Dustin was so happy to see him, and they all accepted him as one of their own ranks.

It felt good to be wanted and needed by someone, even if it was a bunch of kids instead of a girl on a Friday night.

Eventually El fell asleep and Steve was the only one left to hear the Chief's car drive up. The two lovebirds stepped out and made small talk until they found themselves facing each other on the front porch.

"Um, I had a really good time tonight," Joyce said. "It's not every night I get to not make dinner or do the dishes!"

"Did you see the vegetables I had on my plate? Are you now satisfied that I *can* 'eat well'?" Jim joked.

"I know better now," Joyce said, hiding a smile.

They stood, not making eye contact, like a couple of teenagers. Which was ridiculous, since they were both adults with kids and had done this many times before—just, not with each other. Hopper scratched the back of his neck and wondered if he should kiss her when she said, "Should we just go look in on the kids really quick? Just real—real quick. I-I just want to make sure they haven't torn the house apart."

"Well, if Steve has his bat. . ." Hopper said under his breath as they cracked the door open. They were both surprised but relieved to find the house still standing, a closed box of Monopoly pieces on a clean kitchen table, and all six kids sleeping like kittens against Steve's shoulders.

Steve's head lolled around and he said, "Hey. How'd it go?"

"It went well," Hopper volunteered. (They'd gone out to that nice diner, enjoyed several drinks apiece and plenty of laughs, and had many, *many* 'moments'. They had had the time of their lives together.)

Steve nodded the best he could with his neck against the back of the sofa. "Cool, cool."

Joyce pressed the door a little closer to her. "Do you mind if we hang out here for another couple of minutes?"

"Oh yeah, that's cool," Steve said, waving a hand.

"Okay? Cool." Joyce closed the front door as quickly as she could, turning to almost step straight into Hopper. She took a step back and steadied her nerves long enough to say, "Do you have a cigarette on you, by chance?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Jim said. He got out the cigarette and the lighter and flicked it on. He took the first couple of puffs to get it really going before saying, "Here," and bringing it to her lips. She looked up at him through long eyelashes and he stared back. Before she could take a puff, he dropped the cigarette, and ground it underneath his heel. One of his hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer as the other hand gently held her at the bend of her

neck as he bent to kiss her. She completely forgot about the cigarette (really, a ploy between them) and put her hands on his shoulders.

When they pulled apart, he finally said, "So, so much for just dinner."

"Yeah," she said with a laugh, making him smile as he held her close and pressed a kiss onto her hair.

It was past ten-fifteen when Hopper and Joyce came back into the house. The kids had to be woken up; Lucas and Max yawned and leaned against each other in the back of the Chief's pickup, as he'd be their ride home. His bike and her skateboard clinked together in the pickup bed. Mike stood next to Steve, looking longingly at El, whom the Chief held, sleeping, in his arms like she was a child. "Thanks for being here tonight. It meant a lot," Hopper said to Steve.

"Don't mention it," Steve said. He gave Hopper a look when the old man brought out his wallet like Joyce had done earlier (you usually pay your babysitters a grateful sum, after all). "Seriously, don't mention it." Hopper caught Steve's understanding and nodded. Steve looked over the sofa at Dustin and pointed a finger outdoors. "Get in the car, Dustin. I'm taking you home."

Dustin bolted. "I claim shotgun!" To Ms. Byers, "Thanks for having us!" and then he dashed out the door.

Mike looked at Steve and Steve nodded his head outside. "Taking you home, too." While it was weird taking his ex's kid brother home, Steve didn't want to leave *all* the-dropping-kids-off to the Chief. Mike sighed, said goodbye to Hopper and Ms. Byers and Will, and then squeezed El's hand. El smiled against the Chief's shoulder. Mike let go and went to get his bike to stick in the back of Steve's car.

"That's my cue to go," Steve said. He shrugged on his jacket and grabbed his keys and his bat. He looked at Hopper holding El and Joyce watching him and said, the smile fading from his face, "We should do this again sometime." He nodded to himself and said, keys in his hands, eyes on the floor, "Thanks."

When he opened the door, he found Jonathan back early from his date with Nancy. "Hey," Steve said.

"Hey," Jonathan said.

"Twice in one day. That's a new record," Steve said. He stepped aside to let Jonathan in, but said, drawing him aside, "Fair warning: I think your mom has a taste for authority."

Jonathan gave Steve a look where his eyes said everything; Steve smiled. "It wasn't 'just dinner', that's for sure. Again, just a fair warning." His keys jangled as he waved farewell, a smile on his face as he walked down the path to where Dustin and Mike were waiting with their bikes to put in his car.

"Hey, Steve, thanks for babysitting us," Dustin said.

"Yeah, well," Steve said, giving Dustin a brotherly noogie (since there was no hair gel or ladies around, Steve availed himself of this opportunity), "what else would I rather be doing on a Friday night than hanging out with my kids? Now, come on," once the bikes were in the trunks, "let's get you guys home. It's been a long day." And a long evening. But the best Friday evening Steve had had in a while.

**\*looks at the word-count\* GOOD GRIEF, IT WASN'T MEANT TO BE THIS LONG. But everything had to be included. XD**

**Thanks for reading! What was your favorite part? Let me know!**

**AUTHOR'S NOTE 7/13/19: I JUST WANTED HOPPER AND JOYCE TO GO ON A NICE DATE. AND NOW HE'S DEAD. (You know, *supposed to be*, anyway.)**